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Dangers on the Ground in Iraq Lead to Increased Use of Airlifts

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AL UDEID AIR BASE, Qatar, Dec. 11 -- In an effort to reduce the amount of military cargo hauled in vulnerable ground convoys across Iraq, the U.S. Air Force has begun airlifting much larger quantities of materiel to bases around the country.

The stepped-up effort started several weeks ago at the urging of Gen. John Jumper, the Air Force chief of staff, and involves cargo planes carrying vehicles, tank tracks, tires, generators and other goods that normally move over land routes. Such transport is more expensive and less efficient, but senior Air Force officers say the unusual undertaking has become necessary to protect the lives of U.S. troops and civilians who otherwise would attempt to ferry the items by dangerous ground convoys.

"What General Jumper did was basically give me clearance to, in his words, throw away the rule book," said Lt. Gen. Walter E. Buchanan III, the senior commander of U.S. aircraft in the Persian Gulf region. "He is not worried about efficiencies, and so I'm not either."

Convoy security became a hot issue last week when soldiers in Kuwait complained to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that they were being sent to war without sufficient armored equipment to protect them. Pentagon officials have since issued statements saying that the concerns of the soldiers are being addressed and that armored transportation will be provided to troops headed into Iraq.

The Air Force initiative reflects the judgment of top military authorities that the threat to the convoys is not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future and that the best way to ensure safe delivery is to avoid ground transportation.

"I've told them, 'Whatever it takes, let's make it a major objective to get the trucks off the roads,' " Jumper said in a phone interview. The general said he issued his instructions during a visit to the region in early November.

Up to now, the movement of U.S. war goods in Iraq has followed a kind of hub-and-spoke approach. Items have been flown directly from the United States or Europe to large airfields in Baghdad or Balad, about 50 miles north of Baghdad, then driven to bases elsewhere. Many stocks also have entered Iraq from Kuwait in the south or Turkey in the north.

This approach, however, has resulted in military convoys traversing menacing stretches north and west of Baghdad in what is known as the Sunni Triangle, where much of the violence against U.S. and Iraqi forces has been concentrated.

Under the new plan, the Air Force intends to expand direct delivery to airfields either outside or on the edges of the triangle, relying less on Baghdad and Balad as hub operations. Two weeks ago, long-distance cargo flights began direct service into Al Asad air base, which is nearer the U.S. Marine force responsible for securing Anbar province, where the restive cities of Fallujah and Ramadi are located.

Direct flights also are being planned for the airfields of Tallil in the south and Sahra and Quayyarah in the north, according to officers here at the air operations center.

"We'd like to get to the point where the only stuff we take into Baghdad and Balad would be stuff that stays there and does not need to be trucked out," said Army Lt. Col. Tim Juergens, chief of airlift for the 19th Battlefield Coordination Detachment, which is helping to coordinate the initiative with the Air Force.

Additionally, U.S. cargo aircraft are ferrying more materiel from base to base within Iraq. In the past month, the amount of military items hauled daily by air has jumped from about 350 tons to about 450 tons, an increase of nearly 29 percent, according to Col. Mark Ramsay, deputy director of air mobility at the Combined Air Operations Center here, which directs U.S. aircraft operating in the Middle East.

So far, the Air Force has been able to handle the extra load without bringing in more than the 60 C-130 cargo planes it already has in the region. This is because some of the burden has been borne by larger C-17 and C-5 planes that fly the long-haul routes from the United States and Europe.

The bigger planes, which can carry three times or more the load of a C-130, have in the past simply dropped their pallets at one of the major hubs in Iraq and headed back. Now, some of the aircraft are being kept in the region for several days and used for short-haul trips.

According to officers here, plans being drawn up for review by Army Gen. John P. Abizaid, the commander of all U.S. forces in the region, call for an even greater increase in supplies delivered by airlift -- up to about 600 tons a day. Such a rise could put a serious strain on the existing air fleet, officers said.

"I would kid you if I said I'm not worried about sustainment," Buchanan said in an interview. "I can surge, but I have to develop a system that I can sustain this with because we don't know how long this is going to go on."

Asked if that meant more airplanes may be needed, Buchanan replied, "Potentially."

Both the Army and the Air Force find themselves having to put aside traditional notions of how to transport goods in a combat zone.

"For the Army, it's often easier just to put the stuff on the back of a truck," Juergens said. He noted that Air Force requirements for packaging goods on pallets to ensure airworthiness are more stringent than the demands of ground convoys.

The Air Force, in turn, is having to dispense with its inclination to limit use of cargo planes to ferrying only troops and goods, such as ammunition and spare parts, that need to get somewhere in a hurry.

Ramsay said he could envision using aircraft to lift as much as 1,600 tons into and around Iraq daily. But even that, he added, would amount to only a small fraction of the shipments now pouring into the country. The vast majority of the tonnage, he said, is water and fuel, which are too bulky to haul by air.

To address the water issue, senior U.S. logistics officers are looking at options that include buying bottled water from the Iraqis or constructing bottling plants in Iraq.

Buchanan recalled that at the start of the year, before the insurgency escalated, he and other Air Force commanders had expected to scale back military cargo flights and arrange for commercial carriers to assume more of the load.

"I'll be the first to admit," he said, "there was a natural tension that was pulling us to economize and be as efficient as we could, with an expectation that the situation on the ground would allow us to do that. Now, there's a recognition we need to fly everything that we possibly can."